

Congress hard at work doing something or other

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You may be curious, as I have been, about how Congress has been occupying itself this winter as President Bush defends his National Guard attendance record and Democrats decide which candidate will match wits with him -- or at least with NBC's Tim Russert.

Unable to hang out on Capitol Hill, as is my wont, I did the next best thing. When I was back in Washington for a couple days between the South Carolina and Wisconsin primaries, I grabbed a handful of Congressional Records and read up on what I'd been missing.

As you may know, lawmakers didn't exactly race back from their Christmas vacations. The session didn't start until Jan. 20, the date of Bush's State of the Union address.

The very next day, the House took its first substantive votes of the year. In a single dramatic session, it passed momentous resolutions honoring the contributions of Catholic schools, saluting school mentors and supporting efforts to recruit more of them, recognizing and commending the achievements of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and others involved in the Mars Rover mission and agreeing with the sentiment of the Senate regarding the untimely death of former Sen. Paul Simon (D-Ill.).

Not only did the House pass all these resolutions in a single day, but it did so after notably civil debate and with but one dissenting vote, from Rep. Maurice Hinchey (D-N.Y.) on the Catholic school question.

I think this augurs extremely well for a productive and harmonious session -- a sharp contrast to the sometimes bitter debates over Medicare and other issues that marred last year's record.

This session also promises to be a model of efficiency. When the House next convened two days later, an able Republican from Wisconsin, Rep. Tom Petri, served as acting speaker. He banged his gavel at 10 a.m., called on the chaplain for a prayer, led the Pledge of Allegiance and adjourned the body at 10:05, giving these hard-working members a well-deserved four-day break.

When lawmakers returned on Jan. 27, there was more evidence of comity and productivity. With only one dissent, this one from Rep. Ron Paul (R-Texas), the House passed a bill extending the life of the breast cancer stamp from 2005 to 2006.

This required explaining to members the concept of the "semi- postal stamp," which, in this case, invites customers to pay 45 cents for a standard 37-cent first-class stamp; the extra 8 cents goes to the National Institutes of Health and (I'm not kidding) the Defense Department's breast cancer research program.

For good measure, the lawmakers also passed (unanimously) the Medical Devices Technical Corrections Act, but you will have to contact your congressman for an explanation of its significance.

I do not want you to think the Senate was sitting idle, simply observing this burst of activity on the other side of the Capitol. Far from it. The Senate discussed many important issues and agreed that most of them needed further reflection.

Senators understand that the Constitution does not intend them to be hasty. Thus, one reads that Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) said:

"I look forward to having further discussions with the majority leader (Republican Bill Frist of Tennessee) with regard to taking the next legislative step with regard to the Omnibus bill. . . . I do think it is important, as we said yesterday, for the Senate to focus its attention on some of the issues we cited yesterday as real policy concerns. There were procedural concerns about how we got here, but the policy concerns are the ones that can be addressed and can be fixed. I certainly want to assure my colleagues we will look for other vehicles and other ways to address each of these issues over the course of the next several weeks and months. I will have more to say about that later in the day."

Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry lived for 19 years in an environment where such redundant ramblings pass for speech. Imitating that style damn near crippled his bid for the Democratic presidential nomination. Kerry recovered in the nick of time.

The Senate, inspired by Daschle and others, focused so well on "the Omnibus" that it actually passed that gargantuan appropriations bill -- only four months after the government's fiscal year began. Another happy portent of great achievements still to come.

Selfishly, though, I have to say that reading what Congress has been doing made me regret being stuck out on the campaign trail. I hate to miss all the excitement back there.

House starts year with leisurely pace, modest goals

JIM ABRAMS, Associated Press Writer

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These are the dog days of February in Congress, when visitors to the Capitol can view the statues of a lot of dead lawmakers but will have a hard time finding a live one.

Congress always gets off to a slow start in January and February, but the lack of action is particularly noticeable this year, an election year when the Republican majority is more interested in selling its accomplishments than venturing into new legislative territory.

Since convening Jan. 20, the House has met for legislative business on eight days, working only on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. House members have spent the rest of the time back in their districts, or on fact-finding trips at home and abroad. This week the House and Senate were both gone for the "President's Day district work period."

The pace will pick up in coming months as Congress gets serious about the 2005 budget, but House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, R-Texas, has scheduled only about 94 working days this year, low even by recent standards. Senators, who have a more time-consuming legislative process, always spend more time in Washington.

House Democratic Whip Steny Hoyer of Maryland noted one recent Wednesday that they would be in at 10 a.m., would recess at 1 p.m. and would be gone Thursday. "This country has very substantial problems," he said. But "we are going to meet less days projected this year than I can remember."

In addition to the usual two-week spring break in April, and a week off each for Memorial Day and Independence Day, there's a six-week recess to coincide with the party presidential conventions this summer. The goal is to adjourn by Oct. 1 so lawmakers can prepare for the election.

House days in session have been on the decline since around 1980 because of what lawmakers say is the pressure of running for re-election, even though the number of competitive races appears to decline every two years. Younger lawmakers with growing children also like returning home a lot -- where their families live.

In the 1970s, the House met 160 to 170 days a year. More recently, with lawmakers often arriving on Tuesday and leaving late Thursday, the average has been closer to 130 days.

DeLay, asked recently about the abbreviated schedule, said the House worked hard in 2003, knowing that an election year was coming up. "We will not be sitting around waiting" while the Senate catches up, he said.

"I can't help it if we are more efficient than Democrat Houses of the past," he added.

The Senate this year has been occupied so far on a major pension bill and the massive spending package -- four months late -- for the 2004 budget year that began last Oct. 1. The House passed both last year.

But the Senate also spent two weeks on a six-year, \$318 billion highway spending bill that the House has yet to take up.

Larry J. Sabato, director of the University of Virginia's Center for Politics, said the Republican majority, working with the White House, last year accomplished 90 percent of its goals, including more tax cuts, money for Iraq and a Medicare prescription drug bill.

"Their No. 1 goal in 2004 is to expand that majority, and they are free to spend time in their districts, with others helping their colleagues by raising money and appearing for them," he said.

Congress still must deal with some necessary legislation before it goes home this year, including passing a budget and the accompanying spending bills for 2005, touchy areas at a time of mounting budget deficits. Don't be surprised if the must-pass bills don't get passed before the election.

There are also other important bills up for consideration in the coming weeks and months, including the highway bill in the House, energy policy legislation that failed last year and possibly a constitutional amendment to prohibit gay marriages. But time is short and expectations are low.

In the House, Easy Does It Is the Rule for '04

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Juliet Eilperin, Washington Post Staff Writer

Anyone seeking hints about how much Congress might accomplish this year needs only to look at the House schedule, which calls for the lightest legislative load in 40 years.

Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Tex.) has put aside 94 days for the House to be in session this year, compared with 135 days in 2000, the last presidential election year.

"What it says to me is that the majority, together with the White House and the president, has neither any expectation nor interest in a highly productive session of Congress," said Thomas E. Mann, a congressional scholar at the Brookings Institution. "Frankly, I think they find little valuable in having more time in session."

DeLay told reporters that the truncated schedule is no reflection on the leadership's ambitions for the coming year. "The schedule doesn't say anything about the agenda," he said. "What action we take says everything about the agenda."

But even some Republicans acknowledged privately that the heavy lifting of last year -- when Congress enacted President Bush's tax cut package and a Medicare prescription drug bill -- is over. One GOP leadership aide said DeLay's outline of this year's work in a

recent meeting amounted to a reprise of bills left over from last year, such as a major transportation authorization bill and a bid to limit class-action lawsuits.

"I didn't see anything I haven't seen before," he said.

In contrast to last year's flurry, this Congress has gotten off to a slow start. The House has been in session only two days a week since the State of the Union address Jan. 20, leaving little time for real legislating. Recent actions include approval of bankruptcy legislation nearly identical to a bill the House passed in March, which still awaits Senate action.

Indeed, House leaders say the Senate's inaction is one reason they will have lawmakers in Washington less often. "We've got to wait for the Senate to catch up," DeLay spokesman Stuart Roy said.

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) said he is confident his chamber could complete serious work in the 120 days it plans to be in session. Senators would complete "real progress," he said, even if it were more modest than the "monumental legislation" passed last year.

Lawmakers plan an unusual six-week summer recess, in part to accommodate the Republican and Democratic conventions in late July and late August.

Democrats blasted the Republicans for curtailing lawmakers' time in Washington. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) called this past week "a weak workweek" and suggested the GOP leaders convene the House more frequently.

"We have all these challenges facing the American people and we are barely here," Pelosi said. "We have to get real about this, and to do that, we have to be in Washington, D.C."

DeLay dismissed her complaints: "I can't help it if we're more efficient than House Democrat Congresses of the past."

Both parties are pouring resources into Kentucky's special election Feb. 17 to replace Republican Ernie Fletcher, who vacated the 6th District House seat to become governor. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee has spent \$339,000 on behalf of party nominee Ben Chandler, according to PoliticalMoneyLine. The National Republican Congressional Committee has spent more than \$175,000 to help GOP nominee Alice Forgy Kerr.

Both parties' organizations are running television ads, but this time they are explicitly endorsing the candidates because they're paying for the commercials with "hard money" - the small-dollar donations both parties can accept under the new campaign laws. In the past, the two committees used unlimited "soft money" to run issue ads that could not explicitly call for a candidate's election or defeat.

One of the DCCC's ads touts Chandler's role as a state auditor. An NRCC spot advertises Kerr's experience as an educator and state senator.